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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the formation of collaborative high schools in Ohio and presents several incentives that the state's General Assembly might offer to encourage the formation of these schools. A collaborative high school is a high school shared and operated by two or more city, local, or exempted village-school districts. The report explores why some districts have been attracted to the collaborative high school option and why none have moved beyond preliminary discussions. The following questions guided this report: What is the history of inter-district collaboration in Ohio? How would a collaborative high school be structured, governed, and funded? What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of forming a collaborative high school? and What strategies or incentives might encourage the development of collaborative high schools? Some inducements that might foster more collaborative schools include increased state support for collaborative facilities; the prioritization of Ohio School Facilities Commission funding for collaborative facilities; a competitive grant for districts that form a collaborative high school; increased basic aid for districts establishing a collaborative high school; and increased awareness of the collaborative high school option. Schools that received money to expand or replace facilities were less inclined to join in collaborative ventures. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Collaborative High Schools

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Summary

Collaborative High Schools

Collaborative high schools are a little known policy option that allow school districts in Ohio to combine their high schools, while retaining the territorial boundaries and control of their own individual districts. Districts can create such a school by first forming a special type of school district known as a "cooperative education school district." Several districts have considered forming a collaborative high school, primarily as a cost-effective way to replace outdated facilities and to increase course offerings for students. None have done so, however, primarily because of concern over the perceived loss of identity resulting from a combined school.

In the view of superintendents that have considered forming a collaborative high school, it is unlikely that districts will voluntarily choose to share a high school absent some incentive. Possible incentives and strategies to make collaboration more attractive include:

- Increased state share for collaborative facilities funded by the Ohio School Facilities Commission (OSFC) for districts that combine to form a collaborative high school;
- Prioritized OSFC funding for districts that combine to form a collaborative high school;
- Competitive grants for districts that form a collaborative high school;
- Increased basic aid for districts that sponsor a joint school; and
- Increased awareness of the ability to create collaborative high schools.

While collaborative high schools appear at first blush to be an attractive option for districts interested in improving facilities and expanding course offerings within a limited budget, the ties that bind a school to its community are not easily broken.

Collaborative High Schools

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Collaborative High Schools

This information memo describes the issues surrounding the formation of collaborative high schools in Ohio and presents several incentives the General Assembly might offer to encourage their formation. For the purpose of this study, a collaborative high school is defined as a high school shared and operated by two or more city, local, or exempted village school districts.

Introduction

Amended Substitute House Bill 215 of the 122nd General Assembly requires the Legislative Office of Education Oversight (LOEO) "to study ways for school districts to create a collaborative high school with neighboring school districts" and to determine "the types of incentives, including state assistance, , necessary to encourage schools towards this type of collaboration."

Ohio school districts already have the legal authority to form collaborative high schools through the establishment of a special type of school district known as a "cooperative education school district." Although permitted in law since 1993, no districts have formed a collaborative high school, though several have discussed the idea.

This information memo explores why districts have been attracted to the collaborative high school option and why none have moved beyond preliminary discussions. It also offers several incentives and suggestions that the General Assembly may consider to encourage collaboration at the high school level.

The following questions guide this study:

- What is the history of inter-district collaboration in Ohio?
- How would a collaborative high school be structured, governed, and funded?
- What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of forming a collaborative high school?
- What strategies or incentives might encourage the development of collaborative high schools in Ohio?

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What is the history of inter-district collaboration in Ohio?

School districts can and do collaborate with one another in a number of different ways, including joint purchasing of goods and services, contracting with one another for various course work, participating in distance learning programs, and joining with other districts to form joint vocational or joint alternative schools. Appendix A provides additional information on these and other collaborative

arrangements. One of the more intensive forms of inter-district cooperation involves the formation of a collaborative high school.

Joining with a neighboring school district to establish a shared high school is not a new idea in Ohio, although it has only recently been re-instituted as an option for districts.

As early as 1898, the boards of education of two adjacent townships were permitted to establish a "joint township high school district" for the purpose of constructing and/or operating a joint high school. Joint high schools continued as an option for districts until 1943 when their establishment was prohibited in an effort to consolidate the large number of school districts in the state.

Districts were returned the authority to create joint high schools in 1993 with the enactment of Substitute Senate Bill 195 of the 119th General Assembly. The legislation was initially conceived to help school districts in the Toledo area establish an inter-district performing arts academy. Yet, it also allowed districts to unite with neighbors to operate any educational program for any combination of grades - including an entire high school - by forming a special type of school district called a "cooperative education school district." While merging to provide a specific educational program, districts that form a cooperative education school district retain the territorial boundaries and control of their own individual districts.

As initially proposed, cooperative education school districts could only be formed by districts within the territory of a "county school financing district." A county school financing district is a taxing authority created by the governing board of an educational service center. It allows member districts to collectively fund permanent improvements, special education, and other specific educational programs and services.

Less than four months after Sub. S.B. 195 took effect, however, the cooperative education school district statute was modified by Amended Substitute House Bill 152 of the 120th General Assembly. This bill allows any city, local, or exempted village school district to form a cooperative education school district regardless of whether they belong to a county school financing district, as long as the district is established for the sole purpose of operating a collaborative high school.

Current status of collaborative high school formation

Since school districts were given the authority to create collaborative high schools in 1993, none have come together to form a collaborative school or its prerequisite cooperative education school district. To learn whether any districts have even considered creating a collaborative high school, LOEO requested the superintendents of each of the state's 64 educational service centers to identify school districts in their service area that have discussed high school collaboration.

With nearly half of the superintendents responding (representing 283 of the state's 611 school districts), LOEO identified a total of nine districts in northeastern Ohio, that have or are currently considering forming a collaborative high school.

Two of the nine districts were responsible for proposing the amendment to the cooperative education school district statute that allows collaborative high schools to exist outside the territory of a county school financing district. For them, a joint high school was one of several options being considered to deal with expanding enrollment resulting from the increasing urbanization of their rural districts. Discussions between these two districts ended even before the amendment was adopted, however, due primarily to concerns over the perceived loss of identity resulting from a combined school.

The remaining seven districts, all in the same rural county, began discussions about forming one to three collaborative high schools in 1996. Interest in forming a collaborative high school grew out of concerns over deteriorating and inadequate facilities. Also important was the desire to increase course offerings for students, many of whom attend schools that are too small to support courses much beyond the core subject areas. While discussions about forming a collaborative high school continue, the number of districts interested in collaboration has declined due again to concerns over the loss of school identity.

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How would a collaborative high school be structured, governed, and funded?

Cooperative education school districts (the prerequisite to forming collaborative high schools) are governed by two different sections of Ohio law (Ohio Revised Code sections 3311.52 and 3311.521). Exhibit 1 outlines how cooperative education school districts and the collaborative schools formed by those districts would be structured, governed, and funded according to these two different statutes.

Exhibit 1
Structure, Governance, and Funding of Cooperative Education School Districts (CESD)

	Section 3311.52 (County School Financing District CESDs)	Section 3311.521 (Non-County School Financing District CESDs)
Eligible Districts	City, local, and exempted village districts within the territory of a county school financing district.	Contiguous city, local, or exempted village school districts.
Eligible Programs	Any educational program including a high school program.	High school program only.
Eligible Grades	Any grade or combination of grades (including 9-12).	Grades 9-12 only.
Process for Creating	Adoption of identical resolutions by the board of each participating city, local, and exempted village school district within the territory of the county school financing district. Once formed, the county school financing district is dissolved and the cooperative education school district assumes all debts and inherits all existing levies.	Adoption of identical resolutions by the board of each participating city, local, and exempted village school district.
Governing Board	Board of the educational service center or an alternate board composed of at least one member chosen from or by each participating board of education.	Board which includes at least two members selected from or by each participating board of education.
Funding Sources*	• Levies inherited from the county school financing district. • Tax levies. • Funding provisions as determined by member districts. • School lunch subsidies.	• Funding provisions as determined by member districts. • Tax levies. • School lunch subsidies.

* See Appendix B for additional information on cooperative education school district funding.

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What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of forming a collaborative high school?

To determine the perceived advantages and disadvantages of forming a collaborative high school, LOEO spoke with superintendents of each of the nine local school districts identified as having considered forming a collaborative high school. LOEO also spoke with the superintendent of the educational service center (ESC) of the county in which discussions about forming a collaborative high school are ongoing and with several Ohio Department of Education (ODE) officials familiar with school district reorganization.

Advantages

District superintendents believe that the largest benefit of a collaborative high school is the potential for an improved facility at a reduced cost. All nine districts interviewed by LOEO share in common old, outdated high school buildings and an expressed need for new facilities.

Early discussions among some districts included the expectation that the state would pay the entire cost of a new school as a way to encourage collaborative efforts. Districts with buildings as much as eighty years old were initially attracted to the idea of a new high school building at no cost, even if it meant sharing it with other districts. The promise of a new, state-funded facility did not materialize however, and in the end, the perceived costs far outweighed the perceived benefits.

Superintendents were also enthusiastic about the potential for expanding course offerings to their students, particularly advanced placement and foreign language courses. Exhibit 2 lists other perceived advantages of forming a collaborative high school from the viewpoint of district superintendents.

Disadvantages

Districts were ultimately concerned about the loss of school and community identity that would result from consolidating two or more high schools into one school. Of particular concern was how communities would react to the loss of their athletic traditions.

Both a district superintendent and an ODE official, each familiar with past school consolidations in which school identity was a major issue, commented that the loss of identity is a greater problem for parents, former graduates, and the community than it is for students, who quickly adjust and rally behind their new school.

Another superintendent cautioned that the loss of school identity might adversely affect a community's willingness to financially support a collaborative high school. Pointing to his own district, which absorbed the territory of an adjacent district over a decade ago, the superintendent commented that a levy has never passed in the portion of the district that was formerly independent. He attributes the failure of past levies to the lack of attachment felt by residents who preferred having their separate district and schools.

Several superintendents commented that because identity is such a "hot button" issue, few superintendents are willing to push for a collaborative high school for fear of losing their job.

Exhibit 2 lists other perceived disadvantages of forming a collaborative high school.

Exhibit 2
Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Forming a Collaborative High School

Perceived Advantages	Perceived Disadvantages
• Improved facility and technology	• Loss of local identity/independence/pride
• Expanded course offerings — opportunity to keep pace with other districts	• Loss of athletic traditions
• More cost-efficient use of facilities	• Potential loss of levy support
• Wider array of teachers — minimizes negative student-teacher interactions that occur when one student has the same teacher year after year	• Potential lowering of school/district proficiency test scores
• Expanded extracurricular activities	• More competition among students to participate in extracurricular activities
	• Potential problems associated with merging different student populations
	• Potential loss of jobs or job security
	• Fear of the unknown resulting from lack of collaborative high school precedence
	• Increased transportation costs

Collaborative high schools and the debate on school size

The perceived advantages and disadvantages listed in Exhibit 2 reflect the issues raised in research regarding school size. Districts that consider creating a collaborative high school are, in effect, also considering increasing the school's enrollment. Is there an optimum school size? There is no *one* clear answer, but the research illustrates that there are trade-offs related to having a small versus a large school.

Small schools tend to have:

- A greater opportunity for staff to form personal relationships with students;
- Stronger ties to the community;
- Greater parental involvement;
- A more unified commitment to goals;
- A larger percentage of students participating in extracurricular activities; and
- Lower "transactional" costs (such as the costs of communication, coordination, and decision making).

Large schools tend to have:

- More staff that specialize in curricular areas;
- A broader range of course offerings;
- A greater variety of extracurricular activities; and
- Economies of scale.

A selected bibliography that references articles regarding school size is included in Appendix C.

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What strategies or incentives might encourage the development of collaborative high schools in Ohio?

The nine superintendents that have considered forming a collaborative high school were unanimous in their opinion that local districts would not form collaborative high schools without some sort of state assistance to spur their formation. Following are several of their suggestions as well as a brief description of those employed by neighboring states that have had success in fostering collaborative schools.

Strategies and incentives for collaborative high school development

Increased state share for collaborative facilities funded by the Ohio School Facilities Commission. Current school facilities law requires school districts receiving Ohio School Facilities Commission (OSFC) assistance to contribute a local share, proportional to district wealth, towards the cost of new or

renovated facilities. On average, the local share ranges from between 10 to 15 percent of total project cost.

Several superintendents commented that if the state expects districts slated for facility improvements or replacements to collaborate in building a new high school, then it must make the collaborative option more appealing than building their own separate facility. For example, if two districts are each approved for a new high school building, and each are required to pay roughly 13 percent of the building's total cost as their local share, the state could make it more attractive for the two districts to combine their facilities by reducing their *combined* local commitment to something less than 13 percent.

The increased state financial commitment that would result from such a reduction could be offset, in part, by the savings incurred in funding one facility rather than two.

Prioritization of Ohio School Facilities Commission funding for collaborative facilities. Current law requires the OSFC to approve funding for building improvements and replacements based on a district's relative wealth with low-wealth districts receiving top priority. Several superintendents suggested that districts might be more interested in creating a collaborative high school if, by so doing, they could "leap frog" up the waiting list of districts slated for assistance.

Amended Substitute Senate Bill 102 of the 122nd General Assembly seems to contemplate such an incentive by requiring the OSFC to promulgate rules to prioritize funding for districts that develop joint use or other cooperative agreements.

However, there is some question as to whether or not the OSFC has the statutory authority to make collaborative high schools a priority for funding, since current law is silent on how to determine a local share for projects involving two or more school districts.

Competitive grant for districts that form a collaborative high school. The state could establish a competitive grant that would set aside money specifically for the construction of a new collaborative high school. Such a grant would provide a clear incentive for districts to collaborate with one another and might also serve to "jump start" the formation of collaborative high schools by setting a precedent for other schools to follow.

Increased basic aid for districts establishing a collaborative high school. Several superintendents recommended that the state provide increased basic aid allotments to those districts creating and operating a collaborative high school. This aid would serve both as an incentive to form collaborative high schools and as a way to defray possible administrative and transportation costs associated with collaborative high school students.

This suggestion is not new. In fact, Substitute Senate Bill 195, the 1993 legislation that first allowed for the formation of cooperative education school districts, contained a provision stating that it was the intent of the General Assembly to provide additional per-pupil funding to each school district within a cooperative education school district for the first six years of the cooperative district's operation.

Though funds were never earmarked for this purpose, Sub. S.B. 195 established a mechanism whereby districts that were members of a cooperative education school district were to multiply the number of their students attending school within the cooperative district by a set percentage and add that number to their average daily membership (ADM). For the first two years of a cooperative education school district's existence, the multiplier was set at 25 percent. After the second year, the multiplier would decline five percent a year reaching zero at the end of six years.

The intent of these calculations was to increase the ADM of districts belonging to a cooperative education school district and thereby increase the amount of basic aid received from the state.

A similar mechanism is currently used to increase financial assistance to districts that send students to a joint vocational school (JVS). Ohio law allows districts to count each JVS student within their territory as .25 students in their ADM for as long as the student attends the JVS.

Increase awareness of the collaborative high school option. Many of the superintendents with whom LOEO spoke indicated that few people in the education community even know that school districts have the ability to share high schools. As such, collaborations might be enhanced by increasing awareness of their possibility.

One possible way to raise such awareness would be for organizations that represent public schools, such as the Ohio School Boards Association and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, to educate their members about the ability to create collaborative high schools.

In addition, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) may wish to consider raising the visibility of potential collaborative arrangements in its dealings with school districts. One easy way to accomplish this would be for ODE to mention the collaborative high school option, when appropriate, in its consolidation feasibility studies.

Periodically, ODE assists school districts in financial trouble by conducting a consolidation feasibility study to explore the possibility of merging with neighboring districts to maintain financial and educational solvency. While collaborative high schools have been mentioned as an option during discussions with districts, no study to date has included them as a written policy recommendation. As such, ODE may wish to consider making the collaborative high school option more explicit in future reports.

Disincentives

When districts were asked if the state does anything to discourage high school collaborations, several superintendents commented that their discussions about collaboration ended shortly after one or more districts with whom they were negotiating received money from the Ohio School Facilities Commission to expand or replace facilities. As such, Commission funding, though welcomed by the district receiving it, inadvertently squelched any incentive to collaborate with neighbors.

Other states

LOEO surveyed 11 surrounding midwestern states to learn what they have done to encourage collaboration at the high school level. Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, and Minnesota have statutes similar to Ohio that permit districts to share grade levels. Iowa and Kansas have a handful of districts collaborating in this fashion while Minnesota reports the most collaborations with over 20 districts involved.

In terms of incentives, Iowa previously provided additional per-pupil funding for each student enrolled in a collaborative school, but does not do so currently. Minnesota allows districts that share grades to receive additional local property taxes without having to pass a levy.

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Additional Considerations

Cooperative education school districts formed by districts not belonging to a county school financing district are required to forward copies of the resolutions creating the new district to the State Board of Education. Districts belonging to a county school financing district, on the other hand, are not required to forward such resolutions.

In the interest of keeping the State Board, the Ohio Department of Education, and the legislature informed of the status of collaborative efforts, the General Assembly may wish to consider requiring all districts proposing to create a cooperative education school district to forward their resolutions to the State Board.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Examples of Inter-District Collaboration

Joint Educational Programming	Ohio Revised Code section 3313.842 allows school districts to enter into agreements with each other to establish and operate any educational program including "any class, course, or program that may be included in a school district's graded course of study..." This section also permits districts to charge one another for services rendered as part of these agreements. Examples of joint educational programs include advance placement courses and special education classes tailored to specific disabilities.
Distance Learning	Several school districts collaborate with one another by linking classrooms via video and computer technology. This electronic form of collaboration allows participants to learn from instructors and each other without having to be in the same physical classroom. Through two statewide programs, Ohio SchoolNet Telecommunity and the Interactive Video Distance Learning (IVDL) Pilot project, administered by the Ohio SchoolNet Commission, more than 400 high schools over the past four years have been or are currently implementing distance learning technologies.
Vocational Contracts and Compacts	Ohio Revised Code section 3313.90 (A)(3) allows school districts to contract with another school for the provision of vocational education. Several districts engage in reciprocal contracting where each district specializes in a unique course of study and allows students to select the course (and school) of their choice.
Joint Vocational Schools	Ohio Revised Code section 3313.90(A)(2) allows school districts to meet their requirement to provide vocational education to students by forming or belonging to a joint vocational school district, a special type of district specializing in vocational programming. There are currently 49 joint vocational school districts in Ohio serving approximately 50,000 students.
Joint Alternative Schools	Ohio Revised Code section 3313.533(E) allows boards of education to establish a "joint alternative school" for disruptive or academically at-risk students with one or more school districts. Often, joint alternative schools are operated by the local educational service center.
County School Financing Districts	Ohio Revised Code section 3311.50 allows the governing board of an educational service center to create a county school financing district. Once formed, a county school financing district can propose tax levies for permanent improvements, special education, and other specific educational programs and services. There is currently only one county school financing district in the state (Lake County).
Cooperative Education School Districts	Ohio Revised Code sections 3311.52 and 3311.521 allow districts to combine for the purpose of operating a joint high school program and, under certain conditions, other educational programs. See Exhibit 1 for more information on cooperative education school districts.

Appendix B
Cooperative Education School District Funding

Taxing authority

Cooperative education school districts may levy taxes under either the general school levy statute (Section 5705.21 ORC) or the joint vocational school levy statute (Section 3311.21 ORC).

Funding provisions as determined by member districts

The identical resolutions calling for the creation of a cooperative education school district must contain a statement of the annual amount, or the method for determining the annual amount, that each member district is required to pay for the operational, educational, and facility needs of the cooperative district. This amount is then subtracted from the state basic aid payments made to member districts by the Ohio Department of Education and credited to the cooperative district. In determining state basic aid funding, member districts are directed to count students attending cooperative education school districts in their average daily membership.

School lunch subsidies

Cooperative education school districts are eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program and, as such, are eligible for state and federal funding for providing free lunches to needy students. Cooperative education school districts are also eligible for any state monies made available for the purchase of basic food service equipment.

Preschool special education

If the cooperative education school district includes in its education program the instruction of preschool students, the district is eligible for funding for any approved special education units for these students as specified in Ohio Revised Code section 3317.19.

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